

Yi Kwang-su and the Endorsement of State Power

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Introduction

The 1930s and 1940s was a period in world history that witnessed a direct confrontation between the supporters and opponents of fascism. In the 1930s, fascism gained particular strength in both Italy and Germany. These Italian and German fascisms were, in turn, appropriated in 1930s Japan as models for the production of a Japanese-style fascism. In colonial Korea, intellectuals made note of the appearance of fascism on the world stage in the early 1930s. While many intellectuals offered critiques of fascism, a small number of thinkers expressed their approval and admiration of its principles. While few in number, the fact that some intellectuals aligned themselves with fascist thought in the early 1930s without being pressured to do so by the Japanese bears considerable significance. Following the outbreak of war with China in 1937, the wholesale adoption of fascist ideology and institutions occurred in Japan, and colonial Korea was forced to submit to the imposition of the fascist regime of power. A number of colonial Korean intellectuals appeared at this point who yielded themselves to Japanese-style fascism or what we might call ultra-nationalism (*ch'o-kukkajuŭi*). While some of these thinkers were forced to express their approval of fascism, there were those who willingly joined the ranks of its

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adherents. How and why did the intellectuals of this latter group come to ascribe to the tenets of fascism? This paper attempts to answer this question through an examination of the thought of Yi Kwang-su, the representative intellectual of this group.

The position taken by Yi Kwang-su following the outbreak of war with China is usually described as a “recantation” (*chŏnhyang*) or “apostasy” (*pyŏnjŏl*). The use of the term “apostasy,” however, serves to offer little more than an ethical critique of his activities. A number of pro-Japanese collaborators during this period, of course, engaged in the act of “apostasy” for reasons of personal gain, and it is only proper that such cases be subjected to critique on an ethical level. However, the case of Yi Kwang-su—and a small number of other intellectuals—contains elements that render it difficult to proceed by means of ethical critique alone. These intellectuals, that is, sympathized with Japanese fascism itself; they believed in it and supported it willingly. My focus in this paper will be on exploring the nature of the context in which they came to take such a position.¹ This issue, of course, can be approached in a number of ways. This paper will center on an examination of the views of a colonial intellectual such as Yi Kwang-su regarding the individual, society, and state— notions central to the ideologies of liberalism and totalitarianism.

Yi Kwang-su's Views on Liberalism in the 1910s and 1920s

The reception of liberalism in Korea dates from the latter half of the 1890s, the period when the Independence Club began its activities. Liberalist thought was widely introduced during the self-strengthening movements occurring at the close of the Great Han Empire (1897-1910) and in the 1910s. Discussion of liberalism in the 1910s was carried out, for the most part, by a new class of Korean intellectuals who had studied in Japan. Influenced by contemporaneous Japanese intellectual discourse, these intellectuals made much greater use of the term “individualism” than “liberalism.” Following the 1894 Sino-Japanese

1. The following authors take a similar approach in addressing this issue: Yi Kyŏng-hun, *Yi Kwang-su ūi ch'inil munhak yŏn'gu* (A Study of Yi Kwang-su's Pro-Japanese Literary Works) (Seoul: T'aehaksa, 1998); Pak Ch'an-sŭng [Chan-seung Park], “Singminji sigi Chosŏn ūi chayujuŭi wa Yi Kwang-su” (Yi Kwang-su and Liberalism in Colonial Korea), *Han'guk sahak* 17 (Seoul: Han'guk chŏngsin munhwawŏn, 1999); Yi Chun-sik, “Ilche kangjŏmgi ch'inil chisig'in ūi hyŏnsil insik” (Pro-Japanese Intellectuals' Perception of Reality in the Late Colonial Period), *Yŏksa wa hyŏnsil* (History and Reality) 37 (September 2000); Kim Ch'ŏl [Kim Chul], *Kungmunhak ūl nŏmŏsŏ* (Beyond Korean Literature) (Seoul: Kukhak charyowŏn, 2000).

War, emphasis on the state as the supreme entity became increasingly less pronounced in Japan; by the turn of the century, Japanese intellectual discourse had begun to pay considerable attention to the notion of the individual.² Indeed, with the emergence of Taishō democracy in the 1910s, individualism became quite fashionable. Osugi Sakae writes that:

Individualism was at its height in the intellectual and literary worlds during this period [the 1910s]. Self-fulfillment, being faithful, above all, to one's own life, isolation from one's environment, escape from the external world which tormented the self, quiet reflection and contemplation—these things made up the theory and practice of the individualists of this period.³

We see that individualism in Japan was thoroughly imbued with the notion of an “escape to the individual.” This intellectual environment exerted an influence on the Korean students who studied in Japan. Published in the early 1920s, Yōm Sang-sōp's *Before the March First Movement*, provides a detailed portrayal of the encounter with this environment by Korean students studying in Japan in the late 1910s. The hero of this novel was an individualist dreaming of escape from the traditional Korean family.

A number of important articles on individualism written in the 1910s by Korean students studying in Japan appeared in *Light of Study*, the journal of the Overseas Students Association. Some of these articles call for the unmitigated acceptance of individualism. The author of one of these articles, a student using the pen name Tangnamin bemoans the fact that “There is not now, nor has there ever been, a true individual in our society.” Tangnamin asserts that:

As subject, the individual has been nothing more than a slave to government authority; as son, the individual has been looked down upon by his father and older brothers; as youth, the individual has been looked down upon by elders; as a poor person, the individual has been looked down upon by the rich; commoners have been looked down upon by the *yangban*, farmers by scholars, craftsmen and merchants by farmers, women by men, wives by husbands. Every last one of these people has been looked down upon.⁴

2. Matsumoto Sannosuke, *Meiji Shisōshi* (The History of Thought in the Meiji Period) (Tokyo, Shinyosha, 1996), 192.

3. Imai Seichi, “Taishoki Shisō Bunka” (Thoughts and Culture in the Taisho Period), *Kōza Nihonshi* (Lectures on Japanese History), vol. 7 (Tokyo, Tokyo University Press, 1971), 152.

Tangnamin maintains that:

Until individuals in general receive more respect from society at large, until the limitless value of the individual receives its due recognition, until the individual is provided with ample room in which to progress and develop, we have no choice but to use the utmost of our abilities to promote individualism. Moreover, until each individual in our society achieves a sense of self-respect, until each individual comes to a deep awareness of the value of freedom and equality which belongs to each of them, until each strives with all his/her might to put these values in practice, we must promote the individual to the greatest extent possible.⁵

At the same time, this writer pointed out the necessity of exercising caution both when lauding individualism and when putting it into practice. He explained that not only were there a number of varieties of individualism, but that which had emerged in Chosŏn society was fraught with danger. He maintained that a healthy individualism was one in which one came to a self-awareness of the value of the individual, inculcated a desire for improvement of the individual, broadened the arena for the progress and development of the individual, and endeavored to put the self into practice.

The individualism imported into Chosŏn society, however, was “a subjective individualism of the solitary self, one which did not acknowledge any existence outside the self, contained no concept of responsibility towards humankind, the state, the nation, and society.” In his view, this individualism was nothing more than an extreme egocentrism. In the end, he believed that the ultimate goal of a healthy individualism was to create an individual who attached deep meaning and value to working and serving on behalf of humankind, state, nation, and society; he emphasized that it was this individualism which should be adopted by Chosŏn society.⁶ We see, then, that the Chosŏn intellectuals of this period tended to privilege the late nineteenth-century neo-liberalism of J. A. Hobson and L. T. Hobhouse, which rested on the notion of a harmonious relationship between the individual and the collective, over classical liberalism.⁷

4. Tangnamin, “Uri sahoe ŭi nanp’a” (The Turbulent Condition of Our Society), *Hakchigwang* (Light of Study) 17 (March 1918): 8.

5. *Ibid.*, 8-9.

6. *Ibid.*, 9.

What was Yi Kwang-su's view of individualism and liberalism in the 1910s? In a 1917 article in *Youth* entitled "The Blessings Christianity has bestowed upon Chosŏn," Yi Kwang-su wrote that among the gifts given Chosŏn by Christianity was "awareness of individuality" (*kaesŏng ŭi chagak*) or "awareness of the self as individual" (*kaein ŭisik ŭi chagak*). According to Yi, Confucianism precluded an awareness of the self as individual insofar as the sage wrote the rules of etiquette and forced the common people to do nothing but submit unconsciously to these rules. In Christianity, on the other hand, each individual saw God, sought God, through his/her own prayers and meditation. Each individual, therefore, possessed his/her own standard, one that became his/her own individual spirit. It was this that formed the basis of the awareness of the self as individual. Yi wrote that "'Individuality,' the center of the new ethical thought, and 'democratism' [*minbonjuŭi*], the center of the new political thought, were, in actuality, one stream flowing from two sources: Christian principles and natural science." Yi also believed that modern ethics was based upon the proposition that all humans were equal, a truth demonstrated by the fact that each individual, including women and slaves, possessed his/her own spirit.⁸

In general, Yi Kwang-su was concerned less with engaging in a philosophical discussion of individualism than in laying out his thoughts in a popularizing manner. In a 1918 article in *Youth* entitled "On Emphasizing the Children" Yi wrote that:

Civilization can be considered liberation. In the West, modern civilization takes as its defining characteristic and task liberation of the individual spirit from religion, liberation of the common people from the aristocracy, liberation of the citizens from the absolute ruler, liberation of slaves, the liberation of all individuals and groups from any individual or group, regardless of who this individual or group may be, who places shackles on their freedom.⁹

7. For a discussion of late nineteenth-century British neo-liberalism, see Song Kyu-bŏm, "Sinjayujuŭi" (Neo-liberalism) in *The Western Intellectual Movement*, ed. Kim Young-han (Seoul: Chisiksanŏpsa, 1994), 279-308. It cannot be confirmed whether neo-liberalism was directly introduced to Korea in those days or not.

8. "Yasogyo ŭi Chosŏn e chun ŭnhye" (The Blessings Christianity has Bestowed upon Chosŏn), *Yi Kwang-su chŏnjip* (Collected Works of Yi Kwang-su), Vol. 17 (Seoul: Samjungdang, 1966), 19.

9. "Cha'nyŏ chungsim non" (On Emphasizing the Children), *Yi Kwang-su chŏnjip* (Collected Works of Yi Kwang-su), Vol. 41.

For Yi, the overriding characteristic of modern civilization lay in its emphasis on the “liberation from restraints.” In other words, Yi equated modern civilization with liberalism. Yi demanded, in this article, “an independent, free personality be given to children. Children should cast off the idea that they are the possessions of their parents and should take up the idea that they own themselves.”¹⁰ Yi, here, calls for children to become individuals, to achieve, to the greatest extent possible, independence from their parents and families.

In the same context, Yi Kwang-su advocated the destruction of old customs, designating as “evil”:

early marriage, coerced marriage, the ceremonies of coming-of-age, marriage, funeral, ancestor memorial, the reverence of officials and contempt for the people, the reverence of men and contempt for women, the consideration of one's children as one's possession, the idleness of the rich, all superstitions, the ideology of class distinction between *yangban* and commoners, uneconomical and unsanitary homes, mode of dress.¹¹

Yi offered a critique of these customs, asserting, “Just as these things tormented us and caused our downfall, they will torment our progeny and cause their downfall.” Yi asked “If we don't break and crush these evil customs with our own hands, who will do it and when?”¹²

We see, then, that Yi Kwang-su's acceptance of liberalism in the 1910s limited itself, for the most part, to the critique of the traditional family structure, calling for the “independence of the individual from the family.” Yi, it seems, did not yet have a thorough grasp of the philosophical content of individualism and liberalism. Influenced by the individualism and democratism then fashionable in Japan, Yi did not move beyond the level of calling out loudly for an “anti-tradition” and “anti-family” stance.

Yi Kwang-su's Understanding of Liberalism in the 1920s

Immediately following the March First Movement (1919), a “cultural movement” spread throughout colonial Korea. Youth groups took the lead in

10. Ibid., 42-3.

11. “Choröpsaeng chegun ege tŭrinŭn kan'go” (Sincere Words of Advice to the Graduates), *Hakchigwang* 13 (1917): 7.

12. Ibid.

developing this movement, one which called for the construction of a new culture based upon self development, modernizing of customs, reforms and improvements in rural areas. This cultural movement located its theoretical base in theories of reconstruction, culturalism, enlightenment, as well as liberalism. Liberalism in the 1920s moved beyond the introductory stage as intellectuals sought to put theory into practice. As in the 1910s, the term “individualism,” in the early 1920s, was much more widely used than “liberalism.” In an article entitled “Essentials of Individualism,” a writer going under the name of Kojōp explained that beginning at the end of the middle ages, a succession of movements seeking the emancipation of the individual took place in the West: the Reformation, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the American War of Independence, the French Revolution, and the eventual demand for economic freedom. Kojōp viewed all of these movements as seeking freedom, that is, as movements calling for individualism. Kojōp divided individualism into three types, that of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. In his explanation of twentieth-century individualism, he borrowed the views of the philosopher Tanaka Otō (1867-1932), who introduced utilitarianism to Japan. Kojōp quoted Tanaka as follows:

Numerous calls have been made lately for democracy. In our view, however, the most pressing matter is the achieving of what lies at the basis of democracy, individualism. Individualism is the spirit; democracy is the application of this spirit. Individualism is the goal; democracy is nothing more than a method for the achieving of this final goal. Individualism is internal cultivation; democracy is external method. Therefore, where a wise individualism does not exist, a healthy democracy will not develop.¹³

Individualism, that is, is more important than democracy because it is the basis of the latter. Tanaka, moreover, considered individualism more fundamental even than cooperativism (*kyōdōshugi*) or socialism insofar as it was also the foundation of the existence and development of both cooperativism and socialism. It was for this reason that Kojōp believed that Tanaka's individualism could not be considered a pure individualism, expressing his approval of Tanaka's emphasis on the individual at the same time as he allowed for a harmony with cooperativism.¹⁴ Kojōp, that is, preferred an individualism

13. Kojōp, “Kaeinjuūi ūi yag'ūi” (Essentials of Individualism), *Kaebyōk* 2 (July 1920): 94-5.

14. *Ibid.*, 91-7.

that could harmonize with society or the collective to a pure individualism (Kojöp's position, we should note, indicates a leaning towards the British neo-liberalism mentioned above).

What, then, were Yi Kwang-su's thoughts regarding liberalism during this period? Asserting that the national character of the Anglo-Saxon race was one that liked freedom, Yi wrote that:

They do not demand freedom in theory, but freedom in practice. The British constitution, with its miscellaneous and variegated nature, is adequate for the protection of freedom in the practice of the British. To the extent to which they disallow the state from impinging on their individual freedom, the British are thorough individualists. At the same time, they understand the necessity of national life, social life, in other words, collective life; they also have a thoroughgoing spirit of service. Therefore, they are ready and willing to sacrifice their freedom for the sake of the collective (not only the state, but any of the various organizations to which they belong).¹⁵

What Yi found praiseworthy and desired to adopt, then, was the way in which the British emphasized individual freedom while maintaining a readiness to sacrifice themselves for the state and other collectives.

At the same time, Yi blamed the decline of the Korean nation/race (*Chosŏn minjok*) on the ruling class, in other words, on the king and the yangban: "Had the ruling class been progressive, oriented towards the social, had they possessed the values of liberty and equality, they would not, in the end, have driven the *Chosŏn minjok* to its current deplorable state." In Yi's view, however, it was not only the ruling class, but also the Korean people (*Chosŏn minjung*) who possessed a national character marked by a general tendency towards falsehood, sloth, asociality, and trepidation. Yi proffered a list of five of five injunctions which were to be followed in order to reconstruct the national character: (1) one must not engage in the telling of falsehoods; (2) one must not engage in idle fancies and empty arguments; (3) one must keep one's word, obligations, and promises; (4) temporizing, vacillation, and trepidation should be eliminated; (5) the priority of the collective over the individual, in other words, public over private should be emphasized, and life should be understood as service to society.¹⁶ Particularly important, here, is the privileging of public over private.

15. "Minjok kaejoron" (On National Reconstruction), *Yi Kwang-su chŏnjip*, vol. 17, 182.

16. *Ibid.*, 201.

While Yi Kwang-su made tacit reference to liberalism and individualism in the early 1920s, it is difficult to find direct mention of either in any of his writings. For Yi, the most pressing task was the reconstruction of the national character. In nearly every one of his writings during this period he emphasized the need to create organizations that would enable the accomplishment of this goal. At the same time, his call for national reconstruction consistently privileged nation over individual. Moreover, in his “On National Reconstruction,” Yi wrote of his admiration for the British system of colonial rule, a position consistent with his later appeals, beginning in 1923, for colonial Korea to be granted home rule. It is, therefore, very difficult to consider Yi Kwang-su an advocate of liberalism in the 1920s. On the contrary, in an article appearing in 1921 in the journal *Dawn* titled “Society and the Leading Class,” Yi stated that:

Half-baked theories of freedom and equality run rampant in Chosŏn, hindering the development of society to a considerable degree. The notion of equality applies to human rights and to the granting of equal treatment to those equally qualified. Applying the idea of equality to one’s ability, considering everyone’s ability to be equal, ignoring the varying degrees of importance attached to the roles of differing social institutions, failing to distinguish between those who command and those who obey—all of this disallows the realization of any sort of collective life.¹⁷

Yi dismisses, here, the discourse on freedom and equality in Chosŏn as immature, emphasizing instead the necessity of a leading class, the importance of leaders, and the collective.

Viewing Society and the Nation as an Organic Totality

As we noted above, it is difficult to find in Yi Kwang-su’s writings from the 1920s any trace of the liberalist tendencies inherent in Yi’s call in the 1910s to “oppose tradition.” Instead, all that appears in his calls for national reconstruction is a repeated privileging of leadership and the collective over the individual. Yi, that is, altered his view of the relation between individual and society, an alteration linked to his endorsement of what is known as “the theory of society as an organic entity.” Yi’s privileging of society and totality over the individual was, in fact, a general trend among members of the Cultivation

17. “Chungch’u kyegŭp kwa sahoe” (Society and the Leading Class), *Yi Kwang-su chŏnjip*, vol. 17, 157.

Association (which became the Friends Cultivation Association in 1926 and the Friends Association in 1929). Consider, for example, the work of Kim Yun-gyŏng, a founding member, in 1922, of the Cultivation Association. In 1927, Kim published essays titled “Thoughts on Freedom” and “Individual and Society” in *Eastern Light* (the official journal of the Friends Cultivation Association in 1927) in which he explained that there were two views on society: (1) an extreme individualism which rejects society; (2) a consideration of society as that which transcends the individual. Kim found fault with both of these opposing positions. According to Kim, “The extreme view of freedom as absolute self-determination, as that which is devoid of all coercion and restraint, leads to an antisocial individualism, an egoism.”¹⁸ In Kim’s view, the whole was greater than the sum of its parts and, therefore, bore no comparison in importance to the individual. Kim, then, emphasized the importance of society over the individual, viewing the former as, fundamentally, an organic existence, one that was not composed simply of the mathematical sum of individuals, but was a unified organic entity in which all became one, from which one could not be extracted.¹⁹ Kim expressed his approval of the notion of society as an organic entity, linking it to the theory of the cultivation of personality (*in’kkyŏk*) by the individual: “Just as good nutrients are necessary for an organic totality to develop in a healthy manner, the individual must evolve from an incomplete personality to a complete personality in order for society to develop in a healthy manner.”²⁰ Kim believed, moreover, that the individual must subordinate him/herself for the sake of society, and that such subordination was a form of freedom.²¹

Kim Yun-gyŏng’s discussion in *Eastern Light* of this theory of society as an organic entity must have exerted considerable influence on the members of the Friends Cultivation Association. This was not, of course, the first time such a theory had appeared in Korea—Johann Bluntschli’s organicist view of the state had exerted considerable influence upon intellectuals at the close of the Great Han Empire. Bluntschli’s *Allgemeines Staatsrecht* (Universal Right of State) had been translated into Chinese by the American missionary W. A. P. Martin (who lived in China) and was widely read by Chinese, Japanese, and Korean

18. Kim Yun-gyŏng, “Chayu e taehan ilko” (Thoughts on Freedom), *Tonggwang* 13 (May 1927): 37.

19. Kim Yun-gyŏng, “Kaein kwa sahoe” (Individual and Society), *Tonggwang* 9 (January 1927): 20-31

20. “Chayu e taehan ilko” (Thoughts on Freedom), *Tonggwang* 13 (May 1927): 42.

21. *Ibid.*, 42-5.

intellectuals. Bluntschli viewed the state as a living organic entity, the highest form of organism, far superior to any organism found in the animal or vegetable worlds. For Bluntschli, the state absorbed the feelings and thoughts of the people, expressed them as laws, and put them in practice through its actions. It was a “personal entity” (*in’kkyōkch’e*) possessing its own independent will, a body, and a spirit it knew how to express. In short, it was a moral, spiritual organic entity.²² The fact that one can find a number of articles appearing in magazines at this time which use the term “organic entity” to refer to the state indicates the extent to which this theory exerted an influence on the intellectual scene. In his *Collected Writings from the Ice-Drinker’s Studio*, Liang Qichao introduced Bluntschli’s organicist theory of the state, declaring that “The state inheres both spiritual and material elements; therefore, it is identical to humans.”²³ Many intellectuals read Liang’s work and followed Bluntschli in considering the state as an organic “personal entity” composed of both the spiritual and the material. Sin Ch’ae-ho, for example, divided the state into the “spiritual state” and the “formal state,” explaining that the “spiritual state” inherited such things as the citizens’ spirit of independence, the spirit of freedom, the spirit of survival, and the spirit of enhancing the prestige of the state; the “formal state” was a composite of such things as land, sovereignty, artillery, army, and navy. According to Sin, “In all countries in the world the formal state comes into being only after the formation of the spiritual state.”²⁴ Contemporaneous intellectuals were particularly inclined to call this “spiritual state” the “national spirit” (*kukhon*) or the “national character” (*kuksu*). We see, then, that the strident demands made at the time for the “preservation of the national character” resulted from the prior acceptance of the theory of the state as an organic entity.

Intellectuals at the close of the Great Han Empire also considered the “nation” (*minjok*) to be an organic entity. Borrowing from Bluntschli, Liang Qichao defined the attributes making up the “nation” in the following manner: (1) gathering, from the beginning, in one place and subsequently living there; (2) possessing, from the beginning, the same blood; (3) possessing the same bodily appearance; (4) possessing the same spoken language; (5) possessing the same

22. Chŏn Pok-hŭi, *Sahoe chinhwaron kwa kukka sasang: ku-Hanmal ūl chungsimŭro* (Social Darwinism and Theories of the State: A Study of the Last Years of the Great Han Empire) (Seoul: Hanul, 1996), 159-162.

23. Liang Qichao, “A Great Political Scientist Bluntschli’s Theory,” in *Inbingshiwenji* (Selected Works of Liang Qichao), (Shanghai: Gwangzhishuju, 1907), 140-1.

24. “Chŏngsin sang kukka” (The Spiritual State), *Taehan maeil sinbo* (Taehan Daily News), April 29, 1909.

written language; (6) possessing the same religion; (7) maintaining a distance from other peoples (*t'ajok*) in order to pursue a common livelihood, thus forming a unique collective character which was transmitted to succeeding generations.²⁵ Influenced by this formulation, Sin Ch'ae-ho wrote in his *A New Discourse on Reading History* (1908): "The history of the state is based upon the condition of the nation, its fall, rise, weakness, strength." The majority of nationalists subsequently adopted a view of the nation as an organic entity, and Korean nationalism became a cultural nationalism that emphasized, first and foremost, the preservation of the national spirit and the national character. This view of the nation as organic entity continued into the 1920s. A 1920 editorial appearing in the *Tong-a Daily* stated that "The nation is not simply a gathering of individuals; it is an entity which possesses a unique existence." This editorial also insisted, "While individuals live and die, the 'totality' of the nation is a life-force which exists eternally."²⁶ In the early 1930s, Yi Kwang-su followed suit in declaring both that the "the nation is an eternal entity" and that "the nation is destiny. No one possesses the ability to transcend the sphere of the nation."²⁷ We see that Yi Kwang-su and other intellectuals (particularly the majority of nationalists) accepted as matter of course the view of society, state, and nation as organic entities. It was only natural, then, that they valued society, state, and nation over the individual. The organicist view of the nation, moreover, privileged leaders over the masses. In an article written in 1931, Yi Kwang-su wrote that the leading class of the nation could be considered the "brain" of the nation, while individual leaders were its "brain cells."²⁸ Yi's organicist view of the nation led him to subordinate individual to totality and, in the end, provided the theoretical basis for the development of his thought into a "national fascism."

25. Liang Qichao, "A Great Political Scientist Bluntschli's Theory," in *Inbingshiwenji* (Selected Works of Liang Qichao), (Shanghai, Gwangzhishuju, 1907), 141-2.

26. "Segye kaejo ūi pyŏktu'rŭl tanghaya Chosŏn ūi minjok undong ūl nonhanora" (Discussing the Korean National Movement at this Moment of Global Reconstruction), *Tonga Ilbo* (Tong-a Daily), April 6, 1920.

27. "Chosŏn minjok non" (On the Korean Nation), *Yi Kwang-su chŏnjip*, vol. 17, 326-332;

28. "Chosŏn ūi ch'ŏngnyŏn ūn chagi rŭl ch'owŏl hara" (Transcend Yourself, Youth of Korea), *Tonggwang* 24 (August 1931): 43.

Yi Kwang-su's Critique of Liberalism and Adoption of Fascism in the Early 1930s

The full-fledged emergence in the 1930s of fascism in Italy, Nazism in Germany, and statism in Japan exerted a considerable influence on Korean intellectuals. Many intellectuals, particularly those residing within colonial Korea, were particularly attracted to statist thought.

Let us consider, briefly, the basic tenets of fascism (including Nazism). Fascist thought dismisses notions of human rights and human dignity, offering a critique of democracy, individualism, liberalism, pluralism, rationalism, and Marxism. Fascist thinkers advocate, instead, absolutism (dictatorship), statism, irrationalism, blind submission to the leader, xenophobia, racial discrimination, single party rule, anticommunism, state socialism, cooperativism, patriarchy, worship of war and power, love of blood, soil, language and one's native place. Let us examine, in particular, the fascist position vis-à-vis individualism and statism. Fascists do not consider the individual to possess any rights: the individual is endowed with meaning only through the medium of the collective to which that individual belongs. Insofar as the individual is a constituent member of the collective, he/she must move in accord with the dictates of the collective. Fascists sacralize the state as the highest of all entities, refusing to brook individualist behavior that in any way weakens the solidarity it represents.²⁹ While there are, of course, a number of fascisms, we can consider the above elements as common to the various strands of fascist thought.

Yi Kwang-su wrote in 1931 that he “wanted to learn from the Italian Fascists.”³⁰ In 1933, moreover, he expressed his tacit support for Mussolini's assertion that “Only in war does one's energy reach the boiling point; only a nation which carries through in war receives the stamp of nobility,” noting that this position “seems to have drawn sympathy in many countries around the world.”³¹ Previously, in 1928, Yi had written that the three great men of the age were Mussolini, Lenin, and Sun Yat-sen.³²

29. Henri Michel, *Les fascismes*, Chŏng Sŏng-jin trans. (Seoul: Tamgudang, 1984).

30. “Yasu e ŭi pokkwi—ch'ŏngnyŏn a tan'gyŏrhayŏ sidae ak kwa ssauja” (Reverting to Beasts—Unite, Youth, in the Struggle against the Evils of the Age), *Tonggwang* 21 (May 1931): 43.

31. “Chŏnjaeng kwa p'yŏnghwa” (War and Peace), *Chosŏn Ilbo* (Chosŏn Daily), December 5, 1933.

32. “Chŏlmŭn Chosŏnin ŭi sowŏn” (The Earnest Desire of Young Koreans), *Yi Kwang-su chŏnjip*, vol. 17, 297 (serialized in the *Tong-a Daily* from September 4-19, 1928).

As the invasion of Manchuria by the Japanese army increased in intensity, Yi Kwang-su began to emphasize “power” in a number of his writings. Yi expressed his support for the war effort, making declarations such as the following: “Power! Today’s glory lies in power . . . what good are the white clothes of peace? Arm your mind and body, put on the red uniform of a soldier.”³³ He also indicated an envy of “powerful nations” while lamenting his belonging to a “powerless nation”:

The universe is power. Without power, there is no universe. Clouds of war hang over the Asian continent. The call of bugles beckons soldiers to advance, the command to charge is issued, smoke rises from the boom of artillery. It is thus that the power of nations is made manifest. These are the sounds of powerful nations clashing with another . . . but the truth is we have no power. No physical power, no imaginative power, no spiritual power. And so there is no role for us to play in this great production, this performance of total war on the global stage—we are nothing more than nameless subjects crouching behind the curtain.³⁴

Yi’s envy of power, his adherence to a doctrine of rule by force, his praise of war—all of this falls under the rubric of fascism. We must also recall that Yi wrote of his admiration for Mussolini and Hitler, praising the former as having constructed a highly cultured, wealthy, free Italy; Mussolini was the “leader of a great movement towards unity, revered by the entire nation.” As for Hitler’s withdrawal of Germany from the League of Nations, it was symbolic of the “youthful spirit of Germany.”³⁵

During this same period, moreover, Yi expressed his unqualified support of totalitarianism and statism (both aspects of fascism). Yi offered critiques of individualism and liberalism, writing of the former that:

Individualism occupies a central place in modern ethics. It is a self-ism [*honjajuŭi*], a me-ism [*najuŭi*], an out-for-myself-ism [*na man anŭn juŭi*]. In the end, the liberation of the self [*kaesŏng*] that began in the Renaissance passed the bounds of reason. It was taken to an extreme degree and turned

33. “Him ŭi chaeinsik” (A Reconsideration of Power), *Tonggwang* 28 (December 1931).

34. Ibid.

35. “Mussolini ŭi ch’ŏt kyŏlsim” (Mussolini’s First Decision), *Chosŏn Ilbo*, July 31, 1935; “Tog’il ŭi kibaek” (The Spirit of Germany), *Chosŏn Ilbo*, October 19, 1933; “Gandhi wa Mussolini” (Gandhi and Mussolini), *Tonggwang* 33 (May 1932): 29. See also Yi Chun-sik, op. cit., 184-5.

into a radical individualism, one which advocated the 'self for self's sake.' It thus became the source of a fatal disease inflicted upon all of human civilization.³⁶

Regarding liberalism, Yi wrote that:

Anglo-American individualism, so-called liberalism, was imported into our Chosŏn society, and many people became focused on themselves and their happiness (or, more precisely, on their own pleasure and enjoyment); if they went so far as to look outside themselves, they extended their concern to no more than their family's happiness. The spirit of self-sacrifice, the spirit of service for the sake of others, for the sake of the collective to which the self belongs, in other words, for 'them' or for 'us' was nowhere to be seen.³⁷

Yi Kwang-su privileged collectivism over individualism: "Originally, the ethics of village life in premodern Chosŏn were collectivist. In other words, they were [based on] a 'we-ism [*urijuŭi*].'" According to Yi, there were collectivist rules in the village that everyone had to obey. Communal work on village roads, wells, schools, and bridges was carried out with mutual purpose, each giving in accordance with his/her financial and physical ability. No one held back in giving money or labor to assist in coming-of-age ceremonies, marriages, funerals, and ancestor rites. These beautiful customs of collective life were destroyed due to the influx of Anglo-American individualism.³⁸

Yi believed that education and marriage in colonial Korea had become centered on the enjoyment and pleasure of the individual, and that such a way of thinking found its origin in the ethical stance of Anglo-American individualism. According to Yi, rather than the happiness of the individual, one's "role" (the role of son, the role of father, the role of husband) was privileged in premodern Chosŏn. In other words, life was thought of as a father working on behalf of his son and daughter, a wife working on behalf of her husband, a neighbor working on behalf of his/her neighbor. Yi called this role-based view of life a "view of life as service." In Yi's view, "The Chosŏn people's dignified view of life was exchanged for the view of life of individualism and

36. "Yet Chosŏnin ūi kūnbŏn todŏk—chŏnch'ejuŭi wa kusilchuŭi insaenggwan" (The Fundamental Ethics of Premodern Korea: the worldview of totalitarianism and the doctrine of adhering to one's proper role), *Tonggwang* 34 (June 1932): 2.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

Epicureanism.” Yi asserted that therefore

It was necessary for the Chosŏn people of today to make a return, a return to the spirit of premodern Chosŏn, [to replace] egoism and Epicureanism with roles and service, individualism and liberalism with ‘we-ism’ (if it is possible to employ such a term), collectivism, and totalitarianism.³⁹

We see, here, that Yi Kwang-su now preferred collectivism to individualism and liberalism. Also worthy of note is Yi’s designating roles, service, we-ism, collectivism, and totalitarianism as the “Chosŏn spirit.” The “Chosŏn spirit” spoken of by Yi meant, in general, the sacrifice of the individual for the sake of family and the collective.

The tenor of Yi Kwang-su’s critique of individualism and espousal of collectivism bears considerable resemblance to the thought of the Japanese statist (which we will examine below). The difference, at this juncture, was that while the Japanese statist called for sacrifice on behalf of the state, Yi still called for sacrifice on behalf of the “nation.” In his “On the Chosŏn Nation” (1933), Yi maintained that one could not transcend one’s affiliation with the nation and called for the sacrifice of the individual on behalf of the nation. Yi, that is, called for the Chosŏn youth to transcend the individual, stating, “Today’s Chosŏn youth have much too little of a sense of purpose. They tend much too strongly to think only of the pain and pleasure of their individual lives.”⁴⁰ We see, then, that in the early 1930s Yi Kwang-su privileged the collective (the nation) over the individual, offering a fierce condemnation of liberalism.

Yi’s privileging of leaders over the masses became more insistent in the 1930s. In his “On Leadership” (1931), Yi wrote, “Collective life, regardless of the size of the collective, absolutely requires a leader. The more a group is composed of equal individuals bound together by common interests and principles, the more a leader is needed who can represent the entire group and command it.”⁴¹ Elsewhere as well, Yi placed emphasis not on the people, but on a “leader devoted to Chosŏn, who will serve Chosŏn.”⁴² Yi’s privileging of

39. Ibid., 2-4.

40. “Chosŏn minjok non” (On the Korean Nation), *Yi Kwang-su chŏnjip*, vol. 17, 326-332; “Chosŏn ūi ch’ŏngnyŏn ūn chagi rŭl ch’owŏl hara” (Transcend Yourself, Youth of Korea), op. cit.

41. “Chidojaron” (On Leadership), *Tonggwang* 23 (July 1931): 8-9.

42. See “Reverting to Beasts” and “Transcend Yourself,” op. cit. See also Yi Chun-sik, op. cit., 187.

group over individual, leader over people, accords with the emphasis in fascism on leadership.

Indeed, the socialist Kim Myŏng-sik reviled Yi's theories of power and the leader as emanating from fascist thought. While acknowledging that power stood at the center of life, society, and the universe, Kim insisted that freedom and equality were also instances of power. For Kim, the power of freedom and equality signaled the power of justice; the power that suppressed the freedom of humankind and destroyed equality was the power of injustice. Kim took Yi to task for blindly praising power without making these distinctions. Kim also critiqued Yi's invocation of great men and heroes in his writings on the nature of a leader, declaring that Yi's approach bore considerable resemblance to the fascist emphasis on hero-worship.⁴³

Even without referring to Kim Myŏng-sik's critique, we can see that there was, in fact, very little difference between Yi Kwang-su's thought and fascism. Resting on an organicist view of the nation and exhibiting an envious desire for war and power, Yi's fascist thought during this period turned on the call for the sacrifice of the individual for the sake of the totality, devotion to the nation, resurrection of the Chosŏn spirit, and emergence of a strong leader.

Yi Kwang-su's Views on Fascism following the Outbreak of Japan's War with China

Beginning in the mid-1930s, the government-general in colonial Korea, in accordance with the transformation of the political scene in Japan proper, embarked upon a systematic program to suppress political thought and enforce the assimilation of the Korean people into imperial subjects. The order came down, once and for all, to dismantle socialist organizations—KAPF (Korean Artists Proletariat Federation), for example, was dissolved in 1935. In 1937, the “imperial subjects’ oath of loyalty to the emperor” was promulgated; in 1938, Japanese was declared the official language and education carried out in the Korean language was abolished. In 1940, the Name Order was issued (which, in effect, coerced Koreans to change their names to Japanese names), all newspapers—with the exception of the government-general organ *Daily News*—were forced to cease publication, and Koreans were required to participate in Shintō ceremonies. To create, as much as possible, a zeal for war,

43. Kim Myŏng-sik, “Yŏngungjuŭi wa p’asijŭm—Yi Kwang-su ŭi mong ŭl kkyeham” (Hero-Worship and Fascism—Waking Yi Kwang-su up from his Dark Dream of Enlightenment), *Tonggwang* 33 (March 1932): 62-4.

to mobilize Koreans to support the war effort, a branch of the Japanese Association for Total Mobilization of the People's Spirit was established in colonial Korea in 1938. A total of fifty-nine organizations, including the Greater East Asian People's Association and the Service Association, were included in this umbrella association, and fifty-six prominent figures, including Yun Ch'i-ho, participated as members.⁴⁴ This umbrella association, which published *Total Mobilization* and other journals, sought to propagate the imperial spirit, carry out the policy of "Japan and Korea as one body," "preservation of the state through labor," and "preservation of the state through mobilization on the home front." In 1940, the Chosŏn Association for Total Mobilization of the People's Spirit was renamed the Chosŏn Association for the Total Power of the People. Its goal, in the name of "Japan and Korea as one body" and the exhortation to "eradicate the private and serve the public," was the putting in place of a militaristic state apparatus and the construction of a "New Greater East Asian Order." This association, in other words, was entrusted with the task of carrying out the behind-the-lines activities necessary to provide aid to Japan in its extended war effort.

This was the context in which Yi Kwang-su, and others who had already willingly embraced fascist thought, moved from a national fascism predicated upon the "preservation of the Chosŏn nation" to a Japanese fascism based upon "assimilation into the Japanese nation." Both fascisms had the same structure; the only difference between them was the object of worship, "nation" on the one hand, "emperor" on the other. It was not difficult, therefore, for Yi Kwang-su to switch course and orient himself towards an emperor-centered, ultra-nationalist Japanese fascism. Yi, that is, simply replaced the concept of the "Chosŏn nation" with the notion of the "Japanese state and the emperor as one" and "subjects of the Great Empire of Japan." Yi, then, expressed unhesitating support for what was the most pressing task confronting the government-general at the time in colonial Korea, the "making of imperial subjects."

According to Yi Kwang-su, it was the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War and the appointment of Minami Jirō as governor-general that occasioned his discarding the "Chosŏn nation" in favor of becoming a "subject of the Great Empire of Japan." Yi switched course, that is, because the Sino-Japanese War

44. Yun Ch'i-ho (1865-1945) was the president of the Independence Club in 1898, and *Taehan chaganghoe* (Association for Korea's Self-Strengthening) in 1906. He was imprisoned for five years for his involvement in a secret anti-Japanese group, *Sinminhoe*. However, he actively supported the Japanese empire after 1938, and committed suicide after Korea's emancipation in 1945.

demonstrated the statist trajectory of Japan, the Japanese spirit, the future destiny of Asia. He also believed that Governor-General Minami's statement that "the construction of a New East Asian Order is grounded upon [the concept of] 'Japan and Korea as one body,'" the elimination of discriminatory practices in education, the implementation of a volunteer enlistment system, and the Name Order, meant that the government-general was working to insure equal rights for the Chosŏn people.⁴⁵ Yi declared that when the holy war to reconstruct East Asia broke out in the form of the Sino-Japanese War, he felt proud to be a subject of the Great Empire of Japan.⁴⁶ It was his "envious desire for power" which made him think, "The goal of the Chosŏn people was to become complete imperial subjects." Yi exclaimed, "The Chosŏn people are no longer by any means a colonized people. They are not a small and weak nation. They are not a people defeated in war. They are proud, upstanding subjects of the Great Empire of Japan."⁴⁷ This demonstrates that Yi Kwang-su now felt that the policy of "Japan and Korea as one body" allowed Koreans to emerge from their status as a colonized people and become subjects of the Great Empire of Japan, in other words, become a part of the citizenry of an imperialist state.

Yi Kwang-su believed that the only hope left to Koreans was to achieve equality as Japanese citizens: "I have dismissed the thought of becoming a separate entity from Japan."⁴⁸ Yi wrote, further, that:

If one can enjoy glory through the generations as a Japanese citizen, equal in all respects [to the Japanese], why would one entertain the foolish idea to throw away the broad, open expanse of the Great Empire of Japan in order to engage in a costly struggle to build a small insignificant nation?⁴⁹

45. "Tongp'o ege puch'im" (To My Compatriots), *Kyŏngsŏng Ilbo* (Kyŏngsŏng Daily), October 1-9, 1940, in *Ch'unwŏn Yi Kwang-su ch'inil munhak chŏnjip* (Collected Pro-Japanese Literary Works of Yi Kwang-su), vol. 2, Yi Kyŏng-hun ed. (Seoul: P'yŏngminsa, 1995), 129. Both Koreans and Japanese, here, have become "compatriots" (*tongp'o*). The term, then, refers to the entirety of the Japanese people (which now includes Koreans).

46. "NaeSŏn ilch'e wa kungmin munhak" (Japan and Korea as One Body and Imperial Subjects' Literature), *Chosŏn* (March 1940), in *ibid.*, 67-8.

47. "Hwangminhwa wa Chosŏn munhak" (Becoming an Imperial Subject and Korean Literature), *Maeil Sinbo* (Daily News), July 6, 1940, in *ibid.*, 76.

48. "Tongp'o ege puch'im" (To My Compatriots), 134-5.

49. *Ibid.*

In his “My Confession,” written following liberation from Japanese rule, Yi wrote that he thought at the time that “If Japan won the war, we would, at the very least, be given the same rights as Japanese residing within Japan.”⁵⁰ Yi also wrote of his belief that if Koreans took the initiative in volunteering for service as laborers and in the military, their status within the empire would improve and they would no longer suffer from discriminatory treatment.⁵¹ As we noted above, however, Yi’s aim was not simply to eliminate discriminatory practices but to become the subject of a “powerful empire.”

According to Yi, in order to become imperial subjects worthy of the name, Koreans must first rid themselves of their “former concept of the nation.”⁵² In his “Repentance,” Yi lamented his having thought only of the Korean nation and not of the emperor. It had been a mistake to think of Koreans solely as Koreans and not as subjects of the emperor, Japanese citizens. It was for this reason, Yi reflected, that prior to the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War all of his literary works had served merely to incite Korean nationalism to the neglect of the emperor and the patriotism of the citizens of Japan (Yi noted that “Ignorance” was the first literary work in which he rectified this error). Yi declared, further, that:

Koreans should rework their former concept of the nation by expanding the number of those considered compatriots from twenty-three million to one hundred million. Koreans must come to a celebratory awareness of their glorious destiny, one which beckons them to love as their fatherland not only the three-thousand ri peninsula, but all the lands over which the Japanese flag waves.⁵³

Yi wrote that it was his failure to achieve an awareness of himself as a subject of the Great Empire of Japan that had led to his previous position of submitting involuntarily to the Japanese Empire. He stated, moreover, that “The more industrialized Chosŏn became, the higher the cultural level attained, the more I endeavored to locate the negative consequences of development in an

50. “Na ūi kobaek” (My Confession), *Yi Kwang-su chŏnjip*, vol. 13, 268.

51. *Ibid.*

52. “Kinbakhan siguk kwa Chosŏnin” (The Tense Situation and Koreans), *Sinsidae* (New Era) (September 1941): 28-31, in Yi Kyŏng-hun ed., *op. cit.*, 288.

53. “Chosŏn munhak ūi ch’amhoe” (Regrets Regarding Korean Literature), *Maeil Sinbo*, October 1 1940, in *ibid.*, 120-1.

effort to convince myself that my happiness, my life, was suffering.”⁵⁴ For Yi, the error of his ways resembled the attitude an adopted son assumes towards his foster father. Now that his eyes were opened to the truth, Yi declared without reservation the beneficial nature of every Japanese policy ever implemented in colonial Korea:

It is a certain truth that each and every instance in which I have benefited over the past thirty years occurred as a result of the emperor's benevolent consideration of my welfare. A transportation system has been put in place, education has flourished, and hospitals have been established. Public peace has been secured, and industry has boomed. Compared to twenty years ago, we are enjoying an extremely high level of culture.⁵⁵

Yi maintained that Koreans should be confident of their status as subjects of the Great Empire of Japan, that they should arm themselves with the “spirit of imperial subjects,” the “Japanese spirit.” In Yi's view, “The Japanese culture, centering on the spirit of imperial subjects, is the most beautiful culture in the world.” Yi held that “The entire world should learn the spirit of loyalty and piety uniting the people together in service of the emperor.” This spirit was in complete conflict with the Anglo-American individualistic worldview: “There is an enormous moral difference between the Japanese spirit which considers living, working, and dying for the emperor as the fundamental duty of life and the Anglo-American spirit, which is based on [calculating] the relative benefits accruing to the individual.”⁵⁶ For Yi, the former was the true spirit, one that would construct the ideal of peace in the world. Western individualism, on the other hand, considered the state as existing for the sake of the individual and the individual as able to achieve a mode of being which transcended the state. Japanism, on the other hand, considered that “the individual, the people, the national territory all belonged to the emperor. Serving and revering the emperor becomes the goal of each individual, the glory to be achieved in life.”⁵⁷

Yi declared, “The Anglo-American freedom of the individual does not exist

54. “Tongp'o ege puch'im” (To My Compatriots), 125

55. *Ibid.*, 126.

56. Kayama Mitsurō (Yi Kwang-su), “Insaeng kwa sudo—pando yukpaengman ch'ongnyōn namnyō e kohanora” (Life and Cultivation—An Appeal to the Six Million Youths, Male and Female, of the Peninsula), *Sinsidae* (June 1941).

57. Kayama Mitsurō (Yi Kwang-su), “Kungmin munhak munje” (The Question of Imperial Subjects' Literature) *Sinsidae* (February 1943): 63.

in the mind of the imperial subject. All that exists for the imperial subject is life within the sphere of the emperor's benevolence, the obedient performing of duties granted by the emperor. This is what is called loyalty. The totality of goodness lies solely in maintaining loyalty to the emperor. This is the Japanese spirit."⁵⁸ Yi explained that:

For Anglo-Americans, the individual stands at the center. Their goal is the happiness of the individual. For them, the state does nothing more than provides the means to achieve the happiness of the individual. The expression 'Of the people, for the people, by the people' is their national principle; this runs counter to the national polity of Japan. Imperial subjects eliminate private interest by performing their duties as individuals, sons, fathers, members of humankind within the sacred aegis of the emperor's benevolence—this is the Japanese belief.⁵⁹

Rejecting individualism, maintaining an unconditional loyalty to emperor and state—this is what Yi considered the Japanese spirit. Yi went so far as to maintain that insofar as Japanism, the Japanese spirit, possessed truth, justice, and universality, it would prove the salvation of East Asia and, further, the world.⁶⁰ Yi, who had called for the resurrection of the “Chosŏn spirit” in the early 1930s, now praised the “spirit of imperial subjects” and the “Japanese spirit.” In both cases, Yi was calling for loyalty to the state, sacrifice of the individual for the sake of the whole. It is for this reason that Yi was able to accept so unhesitatingly the “spirit of imperial subjects.”

We should, here, pay particular attention to Yi's thoughts regarding the relation between individual and nation, individual and the people (*kungmin*). Yi offered a severe critique of individualism and cosmopolitanism, maintaining that just as a completely independent individual could not exist, a completely universalized humanity was an impossibility: “The only thing we can, in fact, perceive in reality is the nation and the people.” Solidity and substance lay in the character of a people and tradition—anything outside of this, in other words what remained as the character of an individual, was akin to a fleeting shadow, devoid of life. Yi maintained, therefore, that:

58. Ibid.

59. Ibid.

60. “NaeSŏn ilch'e wa kungmin munhak” (Japan and Korea as One Body and Imperial Subjects' Literature) *Chosŏn* (March 1940), in Yi Kyŏng-hun ed., op. cit., 71.

We must reject as erroneous all worldviews put forth in the name of individualism and cosmopolitanism. Political thought and literary thought espoused in the name of liberalism belongs to the category of individualism; political, economic, social, literary, artistic thought advocated in the name of socialism belongs to the category of cosmopolitanism—both individualism and cosmopolitanism belong to the category of erroneous opinions.⁶¹

Yi declared that for the past thirty years Korean literature had sunk into humanism, socialism, art for art's sake; these tendencies should be wiped away and an imperial subjects' literature grounded in the Japanese spirit of a harmonious fusion of loyalty and piety should be constructed.⁶² Yi gave his complete support to the educational policies of Hashida Kunihiro, the Minister of Culture in the Kōno cabinet who stated that “academic thought removed from the everyday life of imperial subjects should cease; the liberal legacy must be wiped clean, and a system must be put in place which embodies the oneness of imperial subjects and service to the state.” Yi praised this declaration as one that should be applied to all fields of endeavor in the Japan of the future, insisting that the goal in life for the people and for each individual should be the “securing of an ethics which considers service to the state the first priority.”⁶³ Yi concluded that:

The literature and cinema of the New Order should cast off individualism and liberalism. Literary activities must follow totalitarianism in their service to the state and must follow Greater-East-Asianism in their service to the New East Asian Order and the establishment of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere.⁶⁴

In 1939, Yi Kwang-su and other literary figures such as Kim Tong-hwan and Pak Yŏng-hŭi organized the pro-Japanese Chosŏn Literary Association. As the war situation progressively worsened, they emphasized the enormity of the responsibility borne by those in the literary world, exhorting all writers and critics to limit their personal activities and serve the war effort through their

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid.

63. (Art in the Present and Future) *Maeil sinbo*, August 8, 1940.

64. Kayama Mitsurō (Yi Kwang-su), “Sin ch'eje ha ūi yesul ūi panghyang—munhak kwa yŏnghwa ūi sin ch'ulpal” (The Direction of Art in the New Order—A New Departure for Literature and Cinema), *Samch'ŏlli* 13, no. 1 (January 1941): 248-253.

literary activities. They published a propaganda organ, *Liberal Arts Critique*, which, along with twenty-one other Korean language magazines, was forced to cease publication in 1941. The effort on the cultural front was, at this time, concentrated into one publication, *Imperial Subjects' Literature* (*Kungmin munhak*). This journal, as the title implies, had as its goal the establishment of imperial subjects' literature in a colonial Korea mobilized to support the war effort.⁶⁵ Ch'oe Chae-sŏ, the journal's editor, defined imperial subjects' literature as grounded in "the awareness that one was not a solitary individual but an imperial subject, that one's solitary existence possessed no meaning or value whatsoever, that one was endowed with meaning and value by the state."⁶⁶ Ch'oe Chae-sŏ's critique of individualism resembled that of Yi Kwang-su. According to Ch'oe, individualism, more than anything else, valued the individual personality, the unique essence of each person. Individualism had as its highest and ultimate goal the total development of the individual personality, the maximizing of its ability, the bringing of this individual to perfection as a microcosm of the world. Ch'oe acknowledged the significance of individualism insofar as it allowed for the greatest possible development of one's talents and abilities. However, Ch'oe viewed individualism problematic to the extent that it relied upon a cosmopolitanism that held the nation and state in utter disregard. Ch'oe critiqued those who espoused individualism as having fallen into an abstract cosmopolitanism, one that ignored the concrete reality of the unmediated relation between all individuals and the nation and national territory. Ch'oe maintained that the proponents of individualism, in the end, ran the danger of bringing about the dissolution of the unitary organic entity of the nation and state.⁶⁷ Ch'oe critiqued individualist literature and cosmopolitan literature, calling for an imperial subjects' literature grounded in Japanism. As this brief summary of Ch'oe's position demonstrates, Yi Kwang-su was by no means the only intellectual to express support of the fascist worldview.

During this period, then, Yi Kwang-su was unwavering in his support of Japanese fascism, in other words, of an ultra-nationalism which fused together Japanism, statism, and militarism. While Yi had, in the early 1930s, adopted portions of German and Italian fascism to formulate the logic of a "national

65. For a discussion of the imperial subjects' literature movement, see Song Min-ho, *Ilche mal amhŭkki munhak yŏn'gu* (A Study of the Literature of the Dark Period of Late Colonial Rule) (Seoul: Saemunsa, 1991).

66. Ch'oe Chae-sŏ, (The Essentials of Imperial Subjects' Literature), *Kungmin munhak* (November 1941): 35-6. This was the inaugural issue.

67. Ch'oe Chae-sŏ, (The Question of the Writer's Worldview), *Kungmin munhak* (October 1942).

fascism,” he now replaced the “Chosŏn nation” with “Japanese imperial subjects.” We should not, therefore, designate the stance taken by Yi following the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War simply as an “apostasy.” Rather, we should view Yi’s acceptance of Japanese fascism following the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War as the natural extension of Yi’s totalitarian worldview and envious desire for “absolute power.”⁶⁸

Withdrawal from Fascism after the 1945 Liberation

To Yi Kwang-su, the liberation of Korea from Japanese colonial rule on August 15, 1945, came too suddenly. This is not to say that he had never expected the defeat of Japan in the war. According to Kim Dong-in, Yi began to accept “the defeat of Japan [as] inevitable” after he participated in a conference of East Asian writers held in Nanjing in November, 1944. Kim also said that Yi seemed to be in great agony because “if Japan would collapse, he would be branded as a traitor because he worked for the Japanese colonial policy for the ‘Japanization’ of Korean people.”⁶⁹

Yi Kwang-su, however, did not consider himself as a sympathizer of Japan. In the preface to “My Confession”, which was written just after the 1945 Liberation, he said that, although he had some sympathy with Japan for a time, he had never been pro-Japanese to the same level as officials of the Japanese Government-General of Chosŏn. In his explanation about the motive behind the writing of “An Excuse of a Pro-Japanese”, which is attached to “My Confession”, he claimed that he wrote it because he thought he understood Japanese Imperialism better via frequent meetings with pro-Japanese people such as government officials. He also wrote here that it was not from his fear of being imprisoned or the pressure from the Japanese authorities that directed him into such pro-Japanese actions. He claimed that he started such pro-Japanese actions because he “wanted to save the Korean people, however small the number might be, from the suppression of Japanese colonial rule by sacrificing himself.”⁷⁰

68. Yi Kyŏng-hun considers Yi Kwang-su’s discussions of imperial subjects’ literature, as well as his other writings, not only as the expression of cooperation with the colonial authorities, but also, to a certain extent, as the further expression of Yi Kwang-su’s worldview. Yi’s theorizing of imperial subjects’ literature, that is, cannot be seen as a “simple apostasy.” See Yi Kyŏng-hun’s *Yi Kwang-su ŭi ch’ŏn’il munhak yŏn’gu*, 262-3 (cited above in footnote 1).

69. Kim Dong-in, “The Korean World of Letters: A 30-Year History,” *Complete Works of Kim Dong-in*, vol. 6, (Seoul: Samjung-dang, 1976), 75

According to “My Confession”, Yi Kwang-su rightly thought that Japan would, after it entered into the Pacific War, press Korean people and resources into service and decided, wrongly, to show a gesture of showing active cooperation with Japan until the war was over. He believed that if he was bound to do it he should do it more actively because it would secure a louder voice for Korean people towards Japan in the coming years. That is, if Japan could win the war, Korean people who actively cooperated with Japan would be given equal rights with Japanese people. Yi also thought that if Japan lost the war, no one would blame the Korean people’s cooperation because it was forced by Japan. On the other hand, he thought if Japan won the war without cooperation from Koreans, or lost it with Chosŏn still remaining as its colony, Japan would take revenge on the Korean people for their lack of cooperation. His conclusion was that the Korean people had no choice but to cooperate, and if they had to, some patriots should be ready to defame themselves by cooperating with Japan in the war. He argued that cooperation by patriotic nationalists, such as himself, would be helpful in reducing the amount of suffering of the Korean people. He decided to take pro-Japanese actions if, according to his own words, “the difficulties Korean people suffering here and now can really be removed by the death of my body.”⁷¹

The words of Yi quoted above show that he took pro-Japanese actions not by enforcement but by his own conviction. In the same context, his adoption of fascism in the 1930s, of which I discussed earlier, can also be said to have resulted from his own conviction because no one forced him into it. The decisions were all made from his own conviction he had at the time when they were first made. After the 1945 Liberation, however, his ideas underwent a major change as clearly shown in an essay he wrote. In his essay, “Life and Nature,” Yi criticized the totalitarian state Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin wanted to build, and said that an ideal state is where freedom of individual people is limited only to a minimum.⁷² Such an abrupt change of thought might have been influenced by the international political situation in which fascism had collapsed, and Korea, at least its southern half, was put under military administration of the U.S., ‘the country of freedom.’ One can also find in the writing his intention to criticize communists, who were calling for the removal of sympathizers of Japanese Imperialism during colonial rule, as totalitarianists.

Yi Kwang-su decided to abandon the belief in fascism he cherished in the

70. “My Confession – Preface,” *Complete Works of Yi Kwang-su*, vol. 16, 332-333.

71. “My Confession - Preservation of Nation,” *Complete Works of Yi Kwang-su*, vol. 13, 267-271.

1930s, because he realized it was not the trend of the time. Should he, then, return to liberalism? One answer to the question can be found in a writing titled "My Country" which he wrote after the 1945 Liberation. Here he offered an opinion about the political system of his newly independent country, saying that the Korean people should neither consider the democracy of Anglo-Saxon countries nor the communist regime of the Slavs. He argued that they should regard Korean history and culture and try to find a new principle for their life before making any final decision. The ideologies he considered uniquely Korean and could be found from Korean history were those of *Hongik-ingan* ("devotion to the welfare of mankind"), *Hwarangdo* (the code for Silla's youth elite corps), and *Sŏndo* ("the way of Taoists"). He was particularly interested in the Five Secular Injunctions of *Hwarangdo* that focused on the virtue of loyalty, filiality, fidelity, bravery and mercy. He stressed that all five values except for the second, filiality, are closely related to the Korean nation as a political group rather than an individual or a family group. He even compared them with the Five Cardinal Relationships of Confucianism, that between ruler and ruled, husband and wife, parents and children, older and younger brothers, and between friends, saying that all these Chinese values, except for the first virtue, that between ruler and ruled, are related to either individuals or families. He concluded that the original ethical code of the Korean people was 'of the nation'.⁷³ Here, again, he considered a nation more important than an individual. As discussed earlier, Yi considered, when he received liberalism in the 1920s, that a society, a *state* or a totality is more important than an individual. This shows that, at long last, he returned to his 'soft liberalism' of the 1920s.

After the liberation from Japanese rule in 1945, Yi Pŏm-sŏk founded a nationalist political group called National Youth Corps under the banner of 'State and Nation First', and An Ho-sang became a leading figure within the Syngman Rhee's brain trust supporting his One-People principle (*ilminjuŭi*).⁷⁴ Yi Kwang-su differed from them in that his nation wasn't the most supreme, as some of his contemporaries had maintained. Yi, however, put a great emphasis on the traditional ideologies such as *Hongik-ingan*, *Hwarangdo*, National Culture and National Spirit. It meant that Yi Kwang-su still shared some important elements of nationalism with the nationalist of his time.

72. "Life and Nature", *Complete Works of Yi Kwang-su*, vol. 14, 478-480.

73. "My Country", *Complete Works of Yi Kwang-su*, vol. 16, 352-366.

74. Park Chan-seung, "The Origin of Korean Nationalism in the 20th Century," *A Study of Korean History* (June 2002): 117.

Conclusion

Influenced by the individualist thought current in Japan and by Taishō democracy, Yi Kwang-su possessed somewhat liberal inclinations in the 1910s. Yi's liberalism, however, represented no more than a call for the independence of the individual from the family and emancipation from tradition. In the 1920s, Yi cast aside even this degree of liberalism. We find, in this period, numerous occasions where Yi privileges the collective (nation and state) over the individual. It was also at this time that he began to insist that the leader was more important than the masses. Yi's position resulted from his having accepted the theory of society, state, and nation as organic entities, a theory that had exerted a tremendous influence on Korean intellectuals, particularly nationalists, beginning in the waning years of the Great Han Empire. In the 1930s, Yi expressed his support of fascist thought—which was finding a receptive audience in many quarters at the time—and began to offer, in the name of totalitarianism, a severe critique of liberalism. Yi linked totalitarianism to the Korean tradition, declaring that Korea's unique tradition was not one of individualism, but one of collectivism, which he called the "Chosŏn spirit." This collectivist spirit became a fascism that located the ethno-nation as the supreme entity. Yi also longed for a national leader (a hero), expressing an envious desire for Korea to become a powerful nation.

Yi Kwang-su's fascism—grounded in an organicist view of the ethno-nation, totalitarianism, and the theory of the Chosŏn spirit—was, following the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, seamlessly transformed into a Japanese fascism based on the theory of the state as organic entity, statism, totalitarianism, familism, and ultra-nationalist Japanism (the Japanese spirit). To the extent that Yi Kwang-su's national fascism and Japanese fascism bore such a strong resemblance to each other, it was not very difficult for him to substitute the latter for the former. The fact, moreover, that he was particularly envious of powerful nations made it easy for him to call to the Korean people to cast aside their status as a "colonized people" and become "subjects of the Japanese empire." Following the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, then, it was only natural that Yi would welcome with open arms the policy of "Japan and Korea as one body" and the declaration that the Korean people would be made into "imperial subjects."

Yi Kwang-su was not the only intellectual to take such a position. In the early 1930s, Yun Ch'i-ho and Sin Hŭng-u had praised Mussolini and accepted the tenets of fascist thought. Following the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War,

moreover, Ch'oe Chae-sŏ, Paek Ch'ŏl, and Yu Chin-o expressed their support of Japanese fascism.⁷⁵ There were, no doubt, many more intellectuals, particularly right-wing nationalists, sympathetic to Japanese fascism. We must also note that the acceptance of fascism was not limited to intellectuals active within colonial Korea. Both Yi Pŏm-sŏk (who had been active in armed struggle outside the peninsula) and An Ho-sang (who returned to Korea after studying in Germany) were strong supporters of statism and fascist thought.⁷⁶ Following liberation from Japanese rule, Yi Pŏm-sŏk created the National Youth Corps under the founding principle that nation and state were the supreme entities, while An Ho-sang formulated the statist "One-People Principle" (*ilminjuŭi*) which became the ruling ideology of the Syngman Rhee regime.

At the same time, we should recall that not all Korean intellectuals chose to travel down the statist path. Intellectuals such as An Chae-hong and Kim Pyŏng-no (active within colonial Korea) and intellectuals such as Kim Ku (associated with the Shanghai Provisional Government) adhered to a liberal worldview throughout the colonial period. Following liberation, moreover, they worked to build a new nation based on their liberal beliefs. The liberals, however, were overwhelmed by the statist, and statist ideology continued to prevail during the Park Chung Hee regime and subsequent military regimes.

75. Ch'oe Chae-sŏ (1908-1964) majored in English Literature at Keijo Imperial University and London University. He became a famous critic of Korean Literature after 1934. Starting in 1939, however, he wrote some pro-Japanese articles. After 1945, Ch'oe became a professor at Hanyang University. Paek Ch'ŏl (1908-1985) graduated from Tokyo Education College in 1931. He then became an editor of the popular magazine *Kaebŏk*, and a teacher at a middle school in Hamhung. But, in 1940, Paek joined the staff of a pro-Japanese Press, *Maeil sinbo*. After 1945, he became a professor at Seoul National University and Chungang University and attended I.P.C. several times. Yu Chin-o (1906-1987) graduated from Keijo Imperial University in 1929 and became a professor at Posŏng College. He majored in law, and wrote some anti-conventional novels in the 1920s. After 1945, he made a draft of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea. In 1952, he became president of Korea University.

76. Yi Pŏm-sŏk (1900-1972) fled to China in 1915 when he was a high school student. He finished a training course at the Chinese Military Academy in 1919, and in the following year led a guerrilla group in a famous battle against the Japanese Army in Chungsanri, southeast Manchuria. Yi became a leader of the Korean Independence Army. Yi returned to Korea soon after liberation and organized the Korean National Youth Association (*Chosŏn Minjok Ch'ŏngnyŏndan*). When South Korea was established in 1948, he became the first Prime Minister of Syngman Rhee's cabinet. An Ho-sang (1902-1999) studied western philosophy at Yena University in Germany. He became a professor at Posŏng College in 1933. After 1945, he taught at Seoul National University, and in 1948 he became the first Minister of Education in Syngman Rhee's cabinet.

Liberals never ceased in their struggle against statist rule, but statist rule, one that relied heavily upon anticommunism, was able to ward off its foes. It was only in the 1990s that liberalism for the first time began to prove itself a match for statism.